

West Asheville Oral History

Mr. Albert Fortune

March 25, 1992

Interviewer: Rob Neufeld

INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT FORTUNE

ROB NEUFELD INTERVIEWER, MARCH 25, 1992, HOME OF ALBERT FORTUNE, 66 SCHOOL ROAD, WEST ASHEVILLE, N.C.

Rob: I'm talking with Albert Fortune in his house at 66 School Road.

Albert: Which is in Malvern Hills.

Rob: Which is in Malvern Hills.

Albert: And which has been here since the early twenties.

Rob: Now, when did Haywood Road begin to be developed by merchants such as your father, Stonewall.

Albert: Dad's name was Stonewall Jackson. In fact, all the boys in his family were named after Confederate generals. My earliest memories would be when I was about six or seven. Haywood Road was already in place at that time. Waynesville Avenue had been the artery to the west before Haywood Road was built, which had to be at the time of the building of that bridge. The Smith Bridge would have served Waynesville Avenue, and prior to that there was a ferry across. I've heard tales about the ferry, and the river freezing over.

Rob: You're going back to the early nineteenth century.

Albert: Right. Waynesville Avenue was named, obviously, because it went to Waynesville, and Haywood Road was named because it went to Haywood County. It overlapped Waynesville Avenue. I can remember the improvement of Haywood Road, which eliminated this railroad crossing out here. Mimosa Drive now in effect is old Haywood Road. As it goes on out there and goes under that trestle, it's known as old Haywood Road. I can remember as a child, when automobiles were still a novelty, Dad would take us out on a Sunday afternoon. There was a state law passed that required motor vehicles to stop at railroad crossings, and that law was a novelty because I remember all of our family wanted to go out and try out the law on Sunday afternoon, and we pulled up, and a line of cars had pulled up and stopped, and each one would stop and then go over. It was interesting to see that anyone was stupid enough to have to have a law to make them stop at a railroad crossing. That was family conversation when I was little.

Rob: Your father established his first business when you were four years old, in 1919, right?

Albert: Yes. As he told me the tale about that, he had been injured in a railroad accident at the age of eighteen, and had lost both limbs. When he came to Asheville, his first business was a World War I surplus business over on Pack Square, and I think he probably operated that for about a year, and ended up being able to accumulate a thousand dollars in cash. He actually founded his business with one thousand dollars. He talked four other guys into putting in a thousand [each], and over a period of ten years or so, he bought them out one at a time.

Rob: Who were the guys? There were five?

Albert: There were five. The business was actually begun with five thousand dollars.

Rob: How did he know them?

Albert: Well, one of them was his brother. One of them was a paint salesman, who was interested in getting an outlet here. He [Albert's father] started out with just paint. The other two were real estate developers, who had interest in property in West Asheville. Bill Hall's grandfather was one of them, and I absolutely cannot name the other one. At any rate, that started at the corner of State and Haywood Road in a frame building there, and was there about five years. I can remember going there as a youngster. Then he moved down to 422 Haywood Road, which is across from the old fire station, and that's the place I can remember real well. He survived there until the Depression. In '32, when his sales were down to about fifty dollars a day, a hardware store had gone into bankruptcy, and he ended up buying that store for eight hundred dollars, which is an amazing thing as we look back on it. He had bid on it at an auction, and that's how he got into the hardware business. He operated both stores for about a year, and then moved the whole operation to what was known then as the end of the car line. That move would have been made about 1934. Business on Haywood Road was moving west. All of this development in the area over here, which we knew as Horney Heights, around the pool there, that was in a developmental stage. Virginia Avenue and Vermont and Blue Ridge, all of those streets down there were developed in that era. Those houses were better class houses than had ordinarily developed down at the other end of Haywood Road. When you think about Swannanoa and Hanover and Alabama and we lived on Westwood Place, which was across the street, and we grew up in Aycock School and the rich kids were at Vance School. As we finally ended up both down at Hall Fletcher, it took a while for us to get socially acclimated.

Rob: Could you look at Haywood Road now and see different sections?

Albert: Now it's homogeneous. In the twenties, there's no question but that the newer residential areas were on the west end of Haywood Road, we were all conscious of the move this way, and it was along about that time that Malvern Hills was developed.

Rob: Can you recall--when all that was going on, it was after West Asheville was included within Asheville city limits, 1917, did West Asheville have a different feeling about its own identity and its own prosperity than it does today?

Albert: In retrospect, I suppose so. As I try to remember characters whom I would consider prominent characters of the era, there were two or three doctors who were definitely West Asheville practitioners, and whose patients were over here. We were never able to get a hospital. There was a little hospital that Doc Gardner had there across the street from our store. He operated probably for ten years. It was a privately owned and functioning operation. He owned it lock, stock, and barrel.

Rob: Across from which store was that?

Albert: That would be in the location of Grace Baptist Church. It was that property. At the time we moved to the hardware store

--it was at 717 Haywood Road--I would have been barely sixteen. I very well remember old Doc Gardner, he was a poor man's doctor. He did surgery and general practice. My guess is that he probably had maybe fifteen or twenty rooms. He had taken over a residence. I can remember being impressed by the fact that his son had been killed in a plane crash locally, and for two or three years he wore a black band on his left arm. This was a novelty to me. I never saw a professional man in public with this symbol of mourning, which he wore all the time. That made an impression on me as a child.

But this idea about West Asheville being an identifiable entity in our minds makes me think about the people involved. There was a bank, an independent bank. The local merchants owned the stock, and a guy named H.B. Posey had organized it and managed until it was eliminated in the crash. It was well managed and if they hadn't gotten involved with the central bank downtown, they would have survived the crash. But they had all of their paper tied up in the big bank downtown, and when they went down, this one did, too.

Rob: Central Bank and Trust?

Albert: Yes. The principals on the board of that bank included J.G. Anderson, who was our doctor, and H.B. Posey, and a guy named Carter, who was involved with Green Hills Cemetery.

Rob: What was his involvement with Green Hills Cemetery?

Albert: I think he developed it. His nephew or grandson or somebody is the guy who's over there now. He could give you that background. I can remember that family was on the board of that bank. And I can remember the morning it closed. I was delivering milk on a bicycle in the neighborhood. My dad was a countryman and he brought a cow to town, and he thought it was very important for all of us kids to have the experience of taking care of that little Jersey. As I came along, it was my turn to sell the surplus milk in the neighborhood. And I had some customers up on Richmond Avenue. On this particular morning, I was riding my bicycle across Haywood Road from Westwood. I saw the paper on the bank, and I stopped my bike and went over and looked, and the sign said, this bank will not open today. I had seventy-five dollars in there. This really got me upset. So I didn't even deliver the milk. I lit out back home to tell Dad. He owed the bank some money, I forget how much, a few thousand dollars, and he had an equivalent amount on deposit in the bank. Well, he thought he was home free when the bank closed, and that one would offset the other, but it turns out that that note had been sold to the bank downtown. So, he ended up having to pay the note. I think he finally got back about--let's see, I got thirty dollars on my seventy-five, that would have been about forty cents on the dollar. It took three or four years for them to liquidate that.

That was a West Asheville institution pure and simple, and the building is still

standing down there. It's on the corner of Haywood Road and Richmond Avenue.

Rob: Do you know why your Dad chose Haywood Road to establish a paint store, and not Pack Square or Broadway or whatever?

Albert: I don't know with certainty. I have an opinion that probably the fact that he was loosely connected with some of the realtors who were developing residential property out here is really why. At that time, there was a good hardware store on the corner of Haywood Road and Westwood Place. It was a branch of a downtown store. The fire station was built across the street there from us--we were 422, it would be about 424. That would have been built shortly after that. West Asheville was a growing economic entity at that time. I was not old enough to have much feel for the rest of the city, but there's no question that before the crash that West Asheville was as involved in development as any part of the city. And I think that in anticipation of this, he would have chosen to come. He didn't get involved himself in real estate very much. He bought a few pieces of property and sold them at a profit during the time that they were going up. His older brother was serious into it, the one who had joined him in this business. He lived over on Fairview Road. But he and Bill Hall's grandfather--his initials were S.B., I remember, and two or three other guys --well, J.T. Horney, the guy who started Horney Heights was one of those fellows.

Rob: One of the fellows who invested in real estate, not one of your father's partners.

Albert: Right. Sulphur Springs Road was cut through along about that time to develop the property on either side of it. Of course, these streets in here [Malvern Hills] were built at the time that they were laying this property out.

Rob: It would be interesting to see to what extent the area was planned and to what extent it was haphazard.

Albert: Well, it was planned in sections. This area here, there were about a hundred lots. Once somebody was able to get an option on or to own some sizable acreage within this area, then whoever that was I think planned with some care. And, as best they understood it in those days, they did fairly decent engineering on it. This property was unusually well engineered. The plats that I've worked with here are as good as they can produce now. I never had anything to do with the plats over in the area east of us, but it's my opinion that whoever developed all of that area in there did it with some skill, and it made a very good middle class neighborhood. There beyond the pool is where I'm talking about.

Rob: Haywood Road was seen as the artery.

Albert: Oh, yes, no question about this.

Rob: Were people taking into consideration such things as natural resources and parks?

Albert: I'm not sure about how much intelligent planning was done about the difference between a business community and a residential community at that stage. I think that just happened. Most of the people who came into Asheville that would have been involved in either buying property or in some way participating as a mechanic in the building of the houses would have come from the rural areas of Western North Carolina. Nearly every rural family that I had any contact with, the kids knew they couldn't all survive on the farms and they would come to town. I could name a dozen different people who for whatever reason ended up with careers in Asheville who had grown up in Henderson County or Haywood County or Madison County or what have you. Dad's own family came from McDowell, and they grew up on Broad River. The oldest boy in the family got started in Asheville, and then Dad joined him, and then the younger one came, and the middle one came. Any member of a family that came into Asheville and had any degree of material success, the rest of them followed him. And I know of any number of families where this did occur.

Rob: Did some people stay on the farm and keep that?

Albert: In our family, no. They moved in stages. Part of them moved into Old Fort. Two different brothers went into business down there. Another one went into business in Greenville. But all of them went into business. Once the older one had made some success financially, and there's little doubt in my mind that he helped financially to get them all started. It was a family loyalty, and as they visited each other on weekends, I can remember Dad taking me to Uncle Jeff's country store in Old Fort. He had a real good business down there. Uncle Andy had a real good business in Greenville. Dad would go down there every once in a while, and they would all share their ideas about who would pay the bills, and where they were going to get the money to pay the taxes, and all this stuff. But that was the primary conversation on our visits.

There were any number of families who moved in that same way. My stepmother, Nan Whitaker, came from Henderson County to Blanton's to learn bookkeeping, and Dad hired her as a bookkeeper, and within a year, he married her. That whole family ended up gravitating into town. Some of them came in and worked for Dad, and I can remember two of her younger brothers came in and worked as painters. They did some contracting and involved a crew of thirty, forty men at times. I can remember her family being involved in that.

Dot Bryson, a real good friend of Lina's, I had breakfast with her yesterday morning, her family had come from Transylvania County into Asheville in various stages. One of her brothers is a contractor who built this house for us. That sort of movement from the rural areas into Asheville was typical.

Rob: It's interesting that that migration was mostly of Western North Carolina folks.

Albert: Yes.

Rob: Now we're probably seeing a lot more migration from all parts of the world.

Albert: Yes.

Rob: Your father was a countryman, you say?

Albert: He was a countryman clear all the way up till he died. He loved to hunt and fish. We ended up with some mountain property where we were able to hunt. He picked up a hundred and fifty acres ... [that belonged] to Nan's family at Mills River. It lay in a valley surrounded by government, and they killed more deer on that property than they did on the government, actually.

Rob: Is that property still wilderness?

Albert: There's a little patch of it that is. After Dad's death, mother sold it to a doctor from Hendersonville and they maintained it with a hunting club up there. I haven't been up there in twenty years.

Dad acquired three or four acres around our house at Westwood Place and did a little small-scale gardening and farming to keep the kids employed and this sort of stuff. He had me pasturing our Jersey cow all over the neighborhood down there. He would usually lease a two or three acre pasture in the summer. I had to go feed and milk the cows all the way up until I went away to college. My next sister inherited that job for a year, and then the next one inherited it for two years. When the last girl was gone to college, Dad sold the cow because there was no one to tend to the cow.

Rob: Families did operate as business, didn't they?

Albert: Well, yes, each one of us had a responsibility. I raised chickens and sold them to Lawrence Metcalf's daddy at the market. I can remember selling him rhubarb and some other vegetables, but particularly chickens. I got the bright notion that I could raise chickens for a real profit. For four or five years, I grew off fifty or a hundred baby chicks, and sold them as fliers or broilers.

Rob: How far did you go with your distribution?

Albert: Well, to Lawrence Metcalf's daddy. He had the market up the street there. Oh, he didn't buy very many from me. I figure each year, if I grew off a hundred, I probably ended up selling fifty, and we ate the rest of them. It didn't amount to much in dollars, but it was a lot of fun for me.

Rob: People had large families. It seems like it was a stage in history where we populated and colonized.

Albert: There were ample opportunities. Any families with any gumption at all could make a living. There were some families that didn't, but those that didn't were looked down upon, mainly because of their lack of energy or laziness.

Rob: That's something different from what people today experience. Now, we have small families, we have women not needing to play the role of mother of seven, and we have people who are decent, hardworking people who are not able to make a living. What you're describing seems to be just the opposite. There was a very entrepreneurial spirit, and anyone who wanted to could start a business. Is that correct?

Albert: I would say so. I don't think there was any lack of opportunity for anybody who was interested in being in business for himself. I think that they realized that it would require a lot of hard work. Anybody that was going to be in business for himself was going to have to devote his life to it. There wasn't any such thing as a forty hour week. You heard John Lawrence talk about the hours they kept the store open.

Rob: I was talking with Sue Weaver Culberson's father, Foots Weaver. Did you know him?

Albert: I've known that family in later years, but I did not know her father.

Rob: He was a very hardy man. He literally worked himself to death.

Albert: I suppose that there were other people who did. When my dad developed his ulcer, when he was about thirty-five or so, he wasn't able to get much local help. He had heard about the Mayo Clinic, so he headed off up there. He stayed about a week, and they ran all the tests. When he was about ready to come home, one of the Mayo brothers called him in for his going home conference. They hadn't given him any pills or any surgery or anything. He said to Dad, "I want you to go back home and take off one day a week from your business and go fishing." That was his prescription. It made Dad mad. He said, "Here I spent all this money to come up here, and I get nothing but this kind of advice." But on the way home, he thought enough about it, so he decided to try it. Every Thursday from then on he went fishing rain or shine, summer or winter, whether he could get anybody to go with him or not. His ulcer was cured within a matter of a month or two. He had no further trouble with that at all. But I remember him being so put out that Dr. Mayo said that that's the only thing that would cure his ulcer.

Rob: Was leisure just for the children?

Albert: In our family there wasn't much planned leisure except that on Sundays we went to church and went to see our country cousins. We did some family gathering but there was no planned recreation of an organized nature that I was involved in over the years until I was old enough to have to work. We managed to fill the times that we had, the afternoons after school and so on. There was plenty of neighborhood recreational activity.

Rob: Previously, you had told me that you had gone to take piano lessons.

Albert: I was forced to do this for three years.

Rob: What was the point of taking piano lessons if you were going to end up like your dad, working all the time?

Albert: Oh, Dad had some wild notion, he wanted us to be cultured kids. He had no particular academic opportunity. His only formal education had been business school. He crawled on his knees before he was able to get his artificial limbs. He was able to go to business school over in Knoxville. Once his limbs had healed enough to where he could wear [artificial ones], he went to Washington and got artificial limbs. There were very few companies that were making decent limbs at that time. He always had to go back up there for fitting, usually once a year or so. But I can remember being involved in that.

He had the bright notion that all of his kids were smart and that they should all go to school and all have opportunities for college. I made it and Clara made it and Emily tried it and missed and Beverly just wouldn't. He particularly wanted us to excel at whatever we had talent for. Somebody told him that all of his kids should study music. He saw to it that we were made to do so until we gave up. Then the third wife in this family was a musician--Cally, the one who's still living. I've been trying to get her to buy a piano now for months. She's been over here playing on Lina's organ just lately. He had no notion of any of the kids being professional musicians. He just felt like it was important. In church, anybody who could sing or be involved in church music--he was very serious about his church obligations. He grew up as a Western Methodist and then when he got sense enough to broaden his vision, while I was gone off to college, he and Mom moved their membership to Trinity Methodist, and he was there for the duration of his life.

The Westerns were fundamentalists way back and they didn't believe in picture shows or pool halls. Card playing was the devil's. I can remember his being rather straight-laced then. He broadened considerably in later years, after we went off to school. When I brought Lina home--and we had been dancing at Chapel Hill --it sort of surprised me that he tolerated her in that stage of our relationship. He liked Lina very much. She won him very shortly after we got here. They were the best of friends for the rest of his life.

Rob: Was there a sense that having that kind of culture would lead you into other types of business or other social classes? Did you feel that if you were a home farmer and a good businessman, that that would be the best possible life or did he want you to become a doctor or something like that?

Albert: I can't really say that Dad really put any pressure on me for a career. There were many families that did. I think that he wanted me to have a decent education and he had some hope that maybe I would develop some interest in business. But there was never any real pressure toward a career goal in my family for me. I wasn't smart enough to excel particularly, and when I finished school, I had some feeling about wanting to be independent of my family and not wanting to come back and work for Dad. I was a teacher for five years. Lina and I were both high school teachers. I taught science and math in Greensboro. Lina and I about starved to death. We made twenty-four hundred dollars the last year we taught together in the city schools of Greensboro. When I came out of the war, Dad was far

enough along to be thinking about selling his business, and he asked me if I'd be interested, and that's when I got in. I mean, I have no particular talent in business at all. I'm not a real successful business person. I've enjoyed my business career very much, but if I had been planning it, I would have studied differently. I studied science and math.

Rob: Success as measured by opening up additional stores and getting into the investment game or success as measured by maintaining the business and providing quality service?

Albert: Primarily, earning enough money to be able to function. I had some wild notions about being able to expand and trying all sorts of ideas, and Dad laughed at me because most of them were impractical.

Rob: What were some of your ideas?

Albert: I felt like we were able to develop a wholesale operation in Western North Carolina...We were promoting paint and sundry products. I guess we had a hundred accounts. Sherwin-Williams and Glidden are dog-eat-dog competitors, and every time I'd get a good salesman trained, they'd hire him away from me. I mean, this was one of the factors that entered into it. And I was just not smart enough to compete with national chains in that field. Nobody else is. Because there aren't any more independents such as I was surviving.

Rob: Since Haywood Road is full of small businesses, how does a small business prevent its good employees from being taken away?

Albert: They don't.

Rob: They have to continually find good ones and train them?

Albert: That, or operate it with your own family. I've been thinking about this in connection with the way Keith's operating this business I'm helping him with now. The people in that organization who are making the profit are family. The average employee that they have is on minimum wage plus a dollar or two an hour maximum. In order for that family to survive, or that business to survive, they cannot afford to bring in thirty/forty thousand dollar a year people as store managers. So as long as there's some member of the family who's smart enough to be the store manager, it exists as a unit. But it's limited. Everybody who works at our store up here is a minimum wage plus a dollar or two an hour person except Keith who in effect is the owner of the business.

If you look up and down Haywood Road, the same thing exists across the street at Luke Atkinson's. Simon Demos tried to do this with his sons. They all got eager to make more money and found they could do better someplace else, and left Simon to dry up on the vine. He's in financial difficulty at this stage. Philip Crouch at the drug store next door is in the same situation, and he has one pharmacist whom he pays a decent wage, but the rest of the people in there are minimum wage people. Home Furniture is a situation where there is a second generation of family operating it. Paul Nichols' two boys are doing a good job with

that business.

Harry Atkins was a genius. He built an operation that was big enough for a chain to buy him out. It would now be about fifteen years ago. He ended up a millionaire in the liquidation of that business. Harry was smart enough to develop enough volume. He paid the people who worked for him a little more money than the rest of us felt like we could afford. I'm talking about the store that's now Builder Way [Harper-Atkins Lumber]. I forgot what the asking price for that business was--it was five or six million dollars. They have not done as well since he sold it to them as he was doing.

Rob: Why is that?

Albert: Absentee management, I guess.

Rob: It's felt in the quality of the service or the quality of the goods?

Albert: I don't know. I haven't had that kind of contact with them. But they have stiff competition from Moore's and Lowe's, and they're not that strong an organization. I think they do a comfortable business and the people who are there, they may survive ten years, but there's no evidence of growth as I can see it. I know two or three people who have stayed with the company after it was sold. There aren't any other businesses at that end of town that I can think of that are that old.

Rob: So, at the time, when you and your dad were involved in the business, was there a feeling that there were different sorts of businessmen? There were ones who were just looking to establish a good business and run it with their family. There were ones who were more ambitious and perhaps more competitive and maybe stepped on some toes. There were ones who were absentee and ran them by a different set of rules. Did you feel that even within the merchant community, there were subgroups?

Albert: It's hard for me to classify the businesses that I can remember on that basis. One group that I haven't talked about that flourished in the thirties and forties, and they were still doing real well when we came back out of the war, was this group of independent cooperative grocers. They had organized a company known as Mutual Distributing and people of the vintage of John Lawrence were involved. On Haywood Road, I can name May's Market; Kelly Roberts, who was down at Beecham's Curve; John Lawrence, who was down on the hill there. Lawrence Metcalf's daddy was involved, too. Almost all of the independents who were at all ambitious joined this coop. They were trying to buck A&P.

There was an old chain called Pinders which had stores in the neighborhood. Then, earlier than that, there had been a local chain known as Jack's Pax. Lois Ebb's daddy and his brother operated it. I can remember three stores in West Asheville and four or five stores across the river. That type of merchandising went by the board as the national chains began to choke them off. Bob Ingle was smart enough to get into it as these others went down.

Rob: When was this?

Albert: Bob's father had one of the stores that was in this mutual coop along with all these other guys. In fact, he was the one who survived out of this coop. This guy named Trantham who had the store down in Biltmore was involved.

Rob: Roy Trantham?

Albert: I believe it was Roy. When they finally liquidated--and this happened after I came back here, it would be about mid-fifties--it was about that time that Bob Ingle got his bright notion. He talked these guys in Hickory into staking him, and he talked Hilliard Ward into staking him as far as putting up stores is concerned, and everybody thought he'd be broke in two years. But he juggled them, and made the stores pay, and has had a phenomenal success.

I can well remember when Bob first started John May told me, "There's no way he can survive. He'll be broke in two years." MDI in Hickory--and I'm sure they have a major interest in his business even now--they saw to it that he had plenty of merchandise, and Hilliard Ward saw to it that his buildings got up, and Hilliard got paid. Hilliard Ward was the contractor; he had the know-how and the equipment and raised enough capital to be able to put up. I can't remember where his stores began, but I do remember the store down on Patton Avenue when they first built it. I guess that was the first store on this side.

Rob: Leicester Highway?

Albert: Yes. Bob was the one exception to this idea of the national chains choking them off.

Rob: He was not part of this cooperative, his father was?

Albert: I'm 90% sure that he was a member of that.

Rob: Bob was?

Albert: I can remember John May--I always had five or ten minutes with John every day because Lina would call me at the store and I'd have to bring groceries home or something that she forgot. I generally stopped a half block away from our store, just walked out there. Nearly every day I had a few minutes with Nancy's daddy. He was a wonderful guy. I liked him very much. He was a real good friend of my dad's, and those two guys are responsible for those two blocks surviving as a location. The old Isis theater building, the building that is to the left of the parking lot, was a theater, and it went under and was sitting there vacant, and Dad and John got the bright notion that maybe they could get enough money together to buy that property. They talked everybody in the neighborhood into putting a few thousand dollars into it and formed the Westside Investment Corporation, which is still in existence. They bought the building and all the land, which is now the blacktop parking area behind Ideal Drugs. This happened about the time that I got back into the act.

We had some wild notion of developing a shopping center in there. We went to the

trouble of drawing some plans. We hired P.N.(?) Ochsenreiter's daddy. He had gone broke in the real estate business. He seemed to be a sort of a high pressure fellow. We talked him into doing some promotional work for us and hunting some potential tenants. We were going to put Rose's in one corner, and we were going to get Bailey's cafeteria to come up in the middle, and John May was going to move his store back in and be the Bob Ingle of that block, and we were going to move the drug store back there, and so on. We were going to buy all those houses across the lower end down there and, in effect, open up a plaza. We argued about it, I guess, for two years, and ended up with a good parking lot.

Well, to start with, none of us was smart enough to do like George Coggins had done when he built Westgate. He dreamed up Westgate while he was sitting up in his office at the Public Service Building. He looked over there and saw this rock quarry down there and decided that that would be a good place for a shopping center. The bridge had just been built across there. This was his tale to me when he was trying to get us to move down there, when he said, "there'd be grass growing in Haywood Road in a few months." He had been successful with getting Westgate off the ground. He got ten-year leases out of Winn Dixie and Eckerd's and so on, and he was so greedy that he ran Eckerd's off and finally choked off the cafeteria and so on. He wanted his money back out in ten years. And he pretty well got it.

Rob: Which cafeteria?

Albert: Bailey's was the cafeteria that was in Westgate.

Rob: They went to Westgate but you had approached them before.

Albert: No, they were already in Westgate. We were trying to have them come up here also. We got enough interest from them that the owner of Bailey's came and talked with us two or three different times about it, and looked at the property. We had gotten far enough along to appraise everything within two or three blocks. In effect, we were going to capitalize by letting--well, for example, the drug store on the corner, that property I think appraised at \$75,000. We were going to give Dr. Crouch \$75,000 worth of stock in this center back here in return for tearing his building down so we could have this wide open up front there. We did the same thing along that whole block. We were going to leave our store on the corner and open up behind it. In fact, we bought the first house there and opened up a parking area there. We were going to cut that whole block off over to the Bledsoe Building and let it stand on the other end and then have this plaza back here. I guess the thing never really had a chance, but it was fun to work on it for two or three years. We just weren't experienced enough or professional enough to see all the loopholes.

Rob: What would you have needed?

Albert: We would have needed a signed contract from Rose's to start with. You see, they had the little store down at the other end of the block. The landlord for that property, who was John Lawrence, by the way, he was an investor in this thing, and he had some hope of

getting Rose's to make that move. But Rose's was at that point going for much bigger stores than we had room for in our block. We never really got any serious interest out of them. We had hoped that we could get them to move that store. Philip Crouch's daddy was going to be the Eckerd's of that block. John May was going to be the Bob Ingle of that block. The barber shop was going and the jewelry store was going. We had them. They were all local. We were comfortable with them. We were going to be the hardware store on the corner. I forgot what we had in mind for the Bledsoe Building. The Bledsoe Building hadn't been sold. It was still owned at that time by the bank. That ambition died a natural death after we worked on it about two years. We were never able to go ahead with it. And nobody else has been. Westgate is the only shopping center that has survived within what I consider West Asheville.

Rob: You didn't feel that you were able to attract the big magnet store that would have been necessary?

Albert: We didn't know how.

Rob: That's the thing that was missing.

Albert: Yes. You're talking about a department store. We were thinking about Rose's being that. There isn't a market in the immediate area for a fancy department store. We were approaching it as a neighborhood shopping center and not an area center at all. We had limited capital available and we had limited imaginations.

Rob: It sounds like your imaginations were there. Small business is becoming once again a great interest. The large stores and the national chains have changed the whole world over the last fifty years, but it seems that with the economy changing, once again people are looking for opportunities, and people are interested in family businesses and small enterprises--maybe not retail enterprises. Maybe they're looking for manufacturing enterprises. But because of that, it might be interesting to look at West Asheville as perhaps something that once again will become a model of how small businesses survive or don't survive. To what degree is Haywood Road in West Asheville a small business commercial district?

Albert: The fact that I've been out for eight years means that I'm not a very good judge of this. I have the impression in the time that I've been back with Keith, which is nearly a year now, and in dealing with customers who are coming into our store from up and down Haywood Road, there are several people who are like what you are describing in the sense that they either have some manufacturing involved or some service aspect. I'm thinking immediately about this guy who calls himself Granddad's Antiques. He's down there across from the old fire station. He is very successful now with a business which involves not just restoration of antiques, but reproductions as well. I helped him the other day get a technique that I picked up in Fine Woodworking about copying old hardware. You can't go to the hardware store to get what's on the drawer over there because nobody's actually producing anything that matches it for over-the-counter sale. Some of the guys in Fine Woodworking

have worked out a system where they could take a sample of the old hardware and set it in a mold and then pour it with an imitation metal. They've come up with a credible piece of hardware. And he's now picked that idea up--I gave him the article about six months ago--and he's already made several copies like this. He's the kind of guy you're talking about, who in my opinion will survive as an independent.

Rob: Is he depending upon regional customers?

Albert: I don't know.

Rob: How do neighborhood stores work? It doesn't seem to me that there's ever been much walk-in traffic. It seems to always have been drive-up.

Albert: Well, certainly for the last fifty years that's probably true. If you go way back, before the automobile was that plentiful, there was no other way. As I remember, when Dad first started, automobiles were a rarity.

Rob: When automobiles came along, people still shopped in local shops as opposed to shopping downtown or in large shopping centers?

Albert: Well, the reason people come to our store instead of going to large shopping centers is first off for personal service, which they don't get from the big stores; and we get right much overflow from Lowe's because we carry the slow movers that they don't. We try to carry long lines of bolts, screws, pipe fittings, and this kind of thing, and Lowe's has the big volume stuff, which we don't have. The big people cannot run a neighborhood hardware store out of business. Now, that's not true with a lot of others, although I keep being amazed at how well Luke Atkinson does in his furniture store, and Home Furniture. Both of those stores, in my opinion, are doing a good business. They may not be doing the volume that Rhodes(?) or Pearlman's are doing, but the owner-managers of those two stores are making real good livings out of them. There's no way that I see that the big stores can run them out of business. Luke is a smart merchant and has done well in that business all these years in spite of the big people.

Rob: There are a number of good stories here. Now, as far as that independent cooperative of grocers...

Albert: Mutual Distributing Company was the name of it.

Rob: Who are the people with whom I might now speak?

Albert: Well, John Lawrence can give you the only first-hand information. He's the only survivor. Nancy would have a little bit of memory--well, Nancy and Frank both. The surviving son in that family died, and Nancy and Frank picked it up behind him.

Rob: You've given me a lot of the story of the Westside Investment Company. That still exists?

Albert: Sure.

Rob: With different people involved?

Albert: No, the same basic ownership of it is there. We have a chunk of it and the drug store owns a chunk of it and the jewelry store owns a chunk of it and the May's estate owns a chunk of it. Luke wouldn't join up. There's one story about that that amuses me every time I think about it.

When Dad and John May were trying to get Luke involved, he was across the street from all this and had no parking at all with his store. He was parking his little Volkswagen bug over in our lot over here. As we talked to him about it--I was involved a little bit--we kept trying to say that he should put two or three thousand dollars in Westside because the people who were parking over here were shopping in his store. He wouldn't budge. As a matter of trying to get even with Luke, and I don't know who did it, but somebody in our group let the air out of the tires of his little bug about three days running. It wasn't but a week or two before he bought the building next to him and opened it up and put a parking area over there for his customers. I wish I knew who let the air out of his tires.

Rob: He never got irate about the tires?

Albert: No, he wasn't that mad about it at all. It was all good-humored foolishness that we did with Luke, and it wasn't that he was belligerent about it. He was just tight. He didn't want to turn loose that two or three thousand dollars that it would take to put his share in. Simon Demos still has a chunk of that stock. John Lawrence still has. The guy who's running it is Parnell Carter at the barbershop.

Rob: Is he someone I can talk with?

Albert: Yes. He can give you the actual ownership of it. He's now managing it to the point that the rent on that building more than pays for keeping the blacktop paved and the taxes and this sort of thing. It's self-sufficient because of the fact that we have good tenants in that building. Parnell has been partly responsible for that part of it.

Rob: Simon Demos is...

Albert: Simon Demos is a Greek. When he first came to West Asheville, Dad called him a Dago and wasn't going to have anything to do with him. Within a month or so, they became friends, and they were devoted friends after that. But prejudice survived in that generation.

I haven't talked to you at all about Dad's tale to me at the supper table one night. There was a black man who had been doing some yard work for us, and I said to Dad across the supper table, "Mr. Waycaster said he'd be back tomorrow," or something of this sort,

and Dad very sternly from the other end of the table said, "Son, we don't call a nigger mister." This bothered my conscience at that stage.

My blood mother was a Quaker from up north and had come down here as a missionary. That's how Dad and she got together. She died with pellagra at a very young age when I was only three years old. The school that she had come to as a teacher was a few miles from Old Fort, and Dad was going to school out there at the time. That's how they got acquainted. And when he started his business in Old Fort as a very young man--this was after his legs were cut off and he'd gotten through school and so on and had gone out there for a year or two--they moved into Old Fort, and he had a very successful business. She died within two years of that time. She died in 1918. Pellagra is a disease that we know now is so easily curable, but they didn't understand it then. In his despondency over her death, he came to Asheville.

Dad's brothers had grown up with the survivors of their grandfather's slaves. Slaves in this area were quite different than they were in plantation areas. There were in this remote section of McDowell County over back of Black Mountain, about ten miles across the ridge there to where their farms ere. Most of the white farmers had a small family of slaves which they apparently owned, and after the Civil War, those slaves didn't leave the area. In most cases, those farmers gave the slaves a chunk of land, and they, in effect, were integrated. But there was this distinction between white man and nigger that was a very definitely understood thing, and they did not cross these boundaries. They were friendly and compassionate and helped each other all sorts of ways.

There is a black family in Asheville now that is named Fortune. The father of that family would have been the same age as my daddy, and as youngsters, they had played together and worked in the fields together and this sort of thing, and had been very friendly over the years. In later years, Bob worked some for my dad in town here. He came to town just like Dad did for better money, and raised his family over in Shiloh. Well, there is a generation of those kids now--I met a few of them, and once in a while I get a telephone call from some of their cousins, somebody from out of town, because one of the boys was named Albert, and he ended up as a butler to the guy who owned the bleachery. In the telephone directory, Albert Fortune in Shiloh and Albert Fortune in Malvern Hills look a whole lot alike, and I'm sure he got a lot of calls for me. One night, his daddy called me from Statesville or somewhere down here, and I recognized his voice because I worked with him as a youngster years ago. Bob thought he had his own son on the phone. When I recognized Bob's voice, I told him, "Bob, this ain't your son, this is Jack's son."

I was trying to make the point that prejudice as it existed in Dad's mind didn't have a moral quotient. Morality to him in no way affected the social strata of that era. There was a black truck driver of ours. Theodore Roosevelt Simonton was his name. A little bitty short black fellow. Dad always talked about him as "my nigger." And Rosey had some drinking problems, but he was very loyal to Dad over all these years, and Dad was never abusive to him, but as we look back on this now, it was in effect an intolerable situation for me, and it bothered me some as I tried to bridge this gap. This happened, I'm sure, all over the south.

We would visit our Yankee cousins in Indiana and Illinois. My grandmother was a Quaker preacher and had two or three black couples in her congregation. They were a rarity in that area in Indiana. When she came down here, I so well remember--Dad loved her

dearly and respected her--but she accepted segregation and didn't preach to Dad about it at all when she was in our home, but I could sense the feeling that she had about it, and I sort of inherited some of that conscience, and maybe it's made some difference in my feeling about civil rights.

But this notion of how we should condemn that generation in retrospect--our daughter, Marie, is a minister and she's a lesbian. Her partner is a psychologist. They live in Seattle. Marie has been involved in concern over sex and domestic violence and she's done enough work with it to where she's actually got a center organized and gotten a pretty good national audience. She travels a lot and she's totally ecumenical. We raised her as a Methodist, and when she went to Yale, she switched to UCC. And, as I argue with Marie about the moral considerations that we should have when we look back on Lina's parents and grandparents and mine, we never come out with quite the same answers about how we should judge. Marie's always bragging about her maternal grandmother who was the Quaker minister on the other side of the family line, and mother was a lay worker with the women's missionary society with the Methodist Church. Every once in a while, I'll hear Marie mention one or the other, either in a sermon or a book, and I've asked her, "How do you think either one of these people would have taken to this notion of your being lesbian? And how would granddaddy have come up with this idea?" She said, "Well, I think that they would have understood if I could have got to them and explained it to them."

There are all sorts of prejudicial issues that come up. We get numb to the status quo.

Rob: Thanks for being so candid. If you wouldn't mind, we could probably stand another go-round some other time.

Albert: I do have a real concern for the community and for what happens to it. I love the people in the area, and they've certainly been good to me. Lina and I had fifty real good years.

END OF INTERVIEW